

Good Stories of the Bowery & the Business World

By Courtney Ryley Cooper

It was late at night. In the offices of the Harrison Cotton company on the top floor of the Rialto building were two men. One was unassuming of the other as he sat at his desk behind the glass partition, whistling to himself, looking over papers and straightening out the tumbled affairs of his desk. But the other man, bending over his books where the shaded light threw its yellowish circle upon the high desk, was watchful, alert; and there showed in his eyes a look of desperate cunning. The whistling from the private office jarred on his nerves. It angered him. He clinched his hands and his jaws set.

"Ten thousand dollars," he muttered, "ten thousand! No wonder he can whistle!" The man in the partitioned room was moving around. The watcher, looking through the small opening of the partly closed door, saw him take some papers from his desk and start out. The cunning eyed one trembled with expectancy.

"If he'll only go to the vault," he whispered, "then—"

The other man had left the inner office now and was walking straight to the great iron door which led to the old-fashioned vault. He took his keys from his pocket and unlocked the door. Then he went within and began to turn the combination that would open the door of the vault proper. The watcher's face had become pale. He saw that the keys had been left in the outer door. Silently, stealthily, he sneaked across the desks and, his eyes ever fastened on the form of the stooping man within, quietly drew the keys from their place and placed them in his coat. He laughed to himself—silently.

The man within was still whistling and the watcher was glad. It would down certain noises of his actions—noises which if heard might cause the frustration of all his plans. One by one he pulled the shades of the office windows, a little at a time that their springs and whirring might not sound too loudly. Then he returned to his desk, took something from one of the largest drawers, hurried to the side of the vault and went into his secret preparations. A bit of fuse was unwrapped. A match was struck. Then the watcher arose, and with a queer look of half triumph, half desperation on his countenance, walked within the shadow of the great iron door.

"Hello, Grissom," said the man at the vault as the combination yielded. "Through checking up?"

"Yes, Mr. Harrison," answered the other. "I'm through checking up—for good."

Harrison laughed softly and the lines on his face seemed to add a malicious twinkle to his eyes.

"That's good. But I'm sorry, old man, at that. We couldn't see how things were going to turn out, you know. When you put your money in the thing it looked good—"

"It didn't," Grissom at the outer door, snapped out the words. He was quietly putting the key on the inner side of the lock. "You knew, Harrison, just what was going to happen when you got me to go in on this thing. You had it all framed up to go bankrupt, sell out, and then let me whistle for my money!"

Harrison's face took on a scowl. "Don't raise that again," he answered. "I've heard that from you about as many times as I want to. I didn't do anything of the kind."

"You lie," came slowly from the man at the door. "You're lying and you know it! You got me into this thing because you knew I had a little money. You milked me dry of it and now you're throwing me overboard. Well—I'm not a fool. I've decided that I won't be thrown."

Harrison sneered. "What are you going to do about it?" Then suddenly he turned, felt his clothing anxiously, and hurriedly picked up the papers he had been examining.

"What's the matter?" came from Grissom. He was leaning forward eagerly, his hand still on the outer door, where the key waited in the lock.

"I thought I smelled something burning," an inscrutable smile came into Grissom's face.

"You'll see it in a minute."

"I'll see it!" Harrison started up. "What do you mean?"

"What I said. You'll—"

A flare of red that illumined the office shot into the eyes of the two men beyond the great door. There was a puff of smoke, a crackling. Harrison started forward.

"It's the building," he shouted. "Grissom, what the devil—?" A fist caught him by the neck of the shirt and sent him reeling backward. There was a clang as the iron door was pulled shut, a clicking as the key turned in the lock, shutting out the glare and the smoke. Harrison opened his eyes to see the angry face of Grissom bending over him.

"Now, Harrison—the voice was cold and hard—we're going to find out a few things. We're—"

Harrison struggled to his feet and gazed wildly at his narrow surroundings. His eyes were staring, his jaw had dropped. His face had assumed a grayish, unwholesome pallor.

"You fired the building!" he gasped. "You—you—good God," he screamed at last, "you're not going to keep me in this place to be roasted alive, are you? Let me out of here—let me out!"

He rushed forward and clawed vainly at the locked door. He screamed. The iron of the door flung his helpless cries back at him. He turned and again beheld that quiet, desperate smile on the face of Grissom.

"Let me have the keys—we'll unlock the door," Grissom was silent. "Grissom! Have you gone crazy? Do you know what you've done? Can't you see you've locked us both in this vault where we haven't a chance to get out of here? We've got to get out of here! Maybe we can get to the fire escape if we can make the break now—give me the keys—give—"

"I don't want a chance—and I'm not going to give you one!"

"But the building—it's on fire—you don't—"

"I know all about the fire. You were right when you accused me. I started it."

"You started it?"

"Yes, just the same as if it was yesterday on the Bowery, instead of over thirty years ago. Chris Berry was a good fellow, and the finest card sharp in the country. He was the best man on the Bowery with the cards on those days, but Chris could give me points without turning a hair. He was ordinarily a mild chap, but he had a temper as hot and as quick as greased lightning."

"It was a lucky thing that he didn't often get mad, for it meant something very serious for him as well as the person he was angered at. Although he was a crooked card player he scorned the ordinary methods of thieves, and if he couldn't make money in cards he wouldn't have gotten it at all, as he was constitutionally opposed to work."

"Being in the same business and something of a crook myself, it was only natural that I should run up against Chris at many a game, and the games were always for blood, but on the level. I was more easy going than Chris, and we took a kind of liking for each other. After a time, in company with Jake Seymour, we went regularly into the business of running a skin game of cards."

"It was a poker game at No. 26 Bowery. Seymour did the steering while we did the playing whenever the sucker was big enough game. The business ran so big and we played so well together that Chris proposed that we should make a tour through the West and South, where we would have a chance to win a bigger stake."

"This just suited me and, with Seymour, who was one of the best bunch of artists I ever saw, and had a tongue so sweet and persuasive that it would coax the bank-roller out of the pocket of any Mr. Tightwad himself, we started West. We put up for a few days at Albany, where the legislature was in session, and cleaned out every dollar there was in both houses. We left Albany with \$21,000 more than we had when we landed there. We were traveling as Western merchants, taking our time on our way home from the spring purchases in New York, and we carried this idea out in all the large cities between New York and Chicago."

"In Chicago we started on another tack, and from there we were Eastern sports making a tour of the country, looking for fun of all kinds, ready for a game at any time. Sometimes we would be together as friends, and then again we would accidentally meet as strangers in some other locality to disarm suspicion. The game we usually played was with marked cards, so that we had a perfect knowledge of the hands in every game, no matter who dealt. This gave us a chance to make it appear as though we played a square game, as we could bet to lose when it would be to our advantage."

"Seymour was the greatest drummer-up of business that I ever met. He was nearly always in the game, and frequently lost heavily, but, as either Chris or I got about all there was at the table in the end, it didn't make much difference. We pulled a lot of money out of Chicago, but we quit when we saw that they were putting up a brace game on us. We didn't do much business then till we got into St. Louis. Then we struck a game after

The other man came close to the fear-ridden Harrison. His eyes glared angrily. "What did I start it for? Because I wanted to hear you beg for a chance to live, that's why! I wanted to see your face grow white and your eyes go wide and staring! I wanted to see you tremble, just as you're trembling now, that's why I started the fire. That's why I've been working here night after night, waiting for the chance when you would do just what you did tonight—unlock the big door here, go inside, and leave the keys where I could get them. And tonight my chance came! Now we're both together in here and we're going to stay together until the end!"

Harrison gasped. He recoiled. Then for a moment he leaned sullenly against the side wall, his forehead wrinkled, his hands clasped. "Give me those keys," he said again.

"No!"

He leaped forward and Grissom jumped to meet him. Their bodies came together, eye stared into eye, clenched hands shot forward as if to parry, and then to meet their goal. They clinched. They fell to the floor. Breath came heavy and fast. Rocking blows struck heads and faces. At last the strong, sinewy fingers of Grissom found their way to Harrison's throat and pressed hard.

"Get up!"

It was the command of Grissom as he released his hold and allowed the dazed man on the floor to rise.

"Don't try anything more like that or I'll end this thing before it's time. Sit down there!"

Wordlessly Harrison found his way to the place in a far corner where Grissom had indicated. He was whimpering. Through a tiny crevice at the top of the great door a bit of smoke was finding its way within. Harrison allowed one hand to touch the wall. It was still cool. Grissom watched him and laughed.

"When a building burns," he said, "vaults fall. It's nine floors to the basement—and this building isn't fireproof."

Harrison attempted to repress the chattering of his jaws and stared in the opposite direction.

"You—you want something?" he said at last.

"I want to talk to you."

"About—that?"

"About what? About that \$10,000 you tricked me out of, that you inveigled me into putting into this business and then you stole by your knowledge of the bankruptcy laws. That's what I want to talk to you about, Harrison!"

"It's a lie—I didn't do it."

"You persist in saying that? You persist in giving up your chance of saving yourself—of getting out of here?"

"Of getting out?"

Harrison looked up once more and noticed that the little stream of smoke still was finding its way through the crevice in the doorway.

"Of getting out," reiterated Grissom. "The keys are in my pocket. But you've got to get out of here first. You've got to open that door. Now, Harrison, I want that \$10,000 you stole from me!"

As he was dragged away from him, he said: "The next time we meet, Sinclair, I'll kill you!"

"All right," said I, "I'll be looking for you."

He went his way and I went mine. It was five years before I landed back in New York. I was a new creature, a new man, and if we ever met he'd keep his word.

About a month after I arrived I met him one night about nine o'clock face to face at Fifth street and the Bowery. I watched him like a cat. He was a tough look, and drew a gun like a flash. I was close to him and he flashed it in my face. Before he could pull the trigger again I drove a knife into his heart.

"That's enough!" he shouted. "I've given you your chance and you don't seem to want it. You answer me with counter-accusations. Well, I'm willing to take the big jump. There's nothing special that I have to live for, and when I go I'm going to take you with me!" He jerked the keys from his pocket and began to scrape one of them against the rough surface of the iron door.

"You understand what I'm doing, don't you?" he asked with a new show of coolness. "I'm wearing down the teeth of this key so that it will not turn the tumblers of the lock. You'll bully me, will you? Try it again and I'll end this thing once and for all. Stay where you are!"

He made a dash for the door and attempted to run. He drew a knife from his pocket and opened it. "If you want a chance—any kind of a chance, stay where you are and talk fast!"

Harrison sank back.

"Don't do that! I'll—I'll talk business. What do you want?"

"You know what I want, the \$10,000—you did rob me, didn't you, Harrison?"

The man was silent.

"You did rob me, didn't you?" A snarl had come to Grissom's lips. "Answer me!"

Harrison turned his head.

"I ask you for the third time: You robbed me. Now confess it!"

"Slowly Harrison's lips framed the words.

"Yes," he said, looking dully into the other's angry face; "yes, I robbed you—"

"Tell the whole thing. You formed my acquaintance with the intention firm in your mind to rob me!"

"Yes—"

"You talked to me of the glowing business prospects of your company, you led me to believe that there was the making of a fortune in it for me. Didn't you? Didn't you?"

"Yes," answered Harrison slowly.

"You prevailed upon me to sell the land I possessed and put my every cent into the business. Even when I was doing that you were planning this bankruptcy game that you might take my sustenance away from me. Isn't that true? Answer me, Harrison!"

The other man seemed to choke. He swallowed hard.

"It's true," he answered at last. "But I'm willing to make it up, Grissom. He fumbled in his pocket. Grissom stopped him.

"Currency," he ordered sharply.

"It's in the safe there. I know it," Harrison opened his mouth to reply. Grissom interrupted. "I want something on which payment can't be stopped—if we get out of here. The currency is in that safe. Now get it out and give me!"

For a moment the man on the floor glared, then silently he rose and walked unsteadily to the little safe in one corner of the vault; he knelt down and began to turn the knob. Grissom, watching him through eyes that were narrowed, again felt the wall.

"Hurry," he said tersely. "The wall's getting hotter. We'll be smothering soon."

Harrison looked at him vacantly. He turned the knob of the safe again. Once more it revolved. The door swung open. Within rested a package of bills. He took them out and counted them. Then he placed them in the waiting hand of Grissom. His eyes suddenly assumed a gleam of eagerness. He looked anxiously at the great door.

"The keys," he said hurriedly, but Grissom only laughed.

"There's more. Take a pencil. That piece of paper will do. Now write."

Harrison made no move to obey. Once again Grissom raised the keys and began to scrape them heavily against the rough door. Within a word had sent for the watchman. Grissom was in a very ugly mood, and mentioned several times, in the hearing of some of Chris's friends, that he'd have his life before daylight.

About ten minutes after 9 Chris left Kelly's place alone. The gambling house was at the corner of First street and the Bowery. About a minute after Chris left, several persons saw Livingston take a bowie-knife from his hip pocket and drop it in his outside coat pocket; then he started on quickly, muttering a threat that he would kill Chris when he found him. No one followed the men, as Chris was able to take care of himself, and Livingston, it was thought, was only putting up a bit of southern bluff.

The finding of the body, as near as could be fixed, was at a quarter past nine, which would have given Livingston just about time to have caught up to Chris without running, as Chris had about a block's start. The wound in the chest, which split the heart in two, physicians said, was made by a bowie-knife. Livingston

had not been seen around his old haunts by anyone since he left Kelly's with the threat to kill Chris, and all these facts certainly pointed to Livingston as the murderer beyond doubt.

"I got on to Livingston's track through a woman he had sent for, and arrested him in a house in First street. These facts certainly pointed to have her pawn his diamonds to raise money to get out of the city. He did not seem at all startled at being arrested, and when I accused him of killing Chris Berry, he replied very coolly that he had been expecting to hear something of the kind, and said he was ready to go to headquarters."

"I tried in every way to get him to admit the killing, even under such circumstances as would make it most reasonable to him, but he positively refused to discuss the murder at all. It was my opinion that there was a deal clear case against him."

"It was a very sensational case, and when these facts were developed before the coroner's jury, they brought in a verdict accusing Livingston of the murder. He was locked up in the Tombs to await trial."

"Two days later 'Lone Jack' Sinclair walked into police headquarters and said that he, and not Al Livingston, had killed Chris Berry. This was a verdict accusing Livingston of the murder. He was locked up in the Tombs, and Sinclair had with him on that night, and gave all the details as he knew them, there was no doubt of its truth."

"Livingston was discharged from the Tombs, and Sinclair was found guilty of manslaughter, and sent away for a long term."

At last came the words: "I have paid Thomas Grissom \$10,000 because it was lawfully due him. Have you got that?" asked Grissom.

"Hurry," answered Harrison. "We—have—haven't got much of a chance left. I'm afraid—the floor's going. It's getting hot in here—it's—"

"Lawfully due him," came the dictation again, "because it was money stolen from him by me. I do this with the full knowledge that this is to be used against me in criminal prosecution."

Grissom stopped the pencil had stopped.

The paper and pencil were thrown to the floor. Harrison's hands raised high in the air and the fingers spread widely outward.

"I won't!"

"Sign that!" came the stern order, "or—"

"Sign it!"

The paper was raised again. The pencil scratched its way along. There was a pause in which the two men glared at each other.

"Now!"

The answer was the grating of the key in the lock. Harrison, his head bent low, his handkerchief pressed to his nostrils, cursing inwardly the man beside him, who worked not without him with that ever ready knife, bent himself for the rush into the flames. The key grated again. The lock pulled slowly back and stopped. Grissom pressed hard against the great door and prepared to open it.

"Now!" he cried as he gave the final pressure, "turn to the left. Make for the window there. It's the fire escape!"

The door swung open and Harrison, his eyes almost closed to guard against the smoke and flames, rushed forward turned, struck out his arms and then, with a cry of amazement, stood stock still. The office was as it always had been except for a sheeting of smoke that lay against the ceiling. The electric lights still gleamed. There were no evidences of conflagration except the still smoldering remains of a coil of pitch smoked rope that reposed within a deepest metal pan at the side of the vault, and nearly an empty car that once had contained theatrical "red fire." Harrison stared about him in a bewildered way from the pan to the ceiling, to the drawn curtains, and then to the open vault. Gradually he understood. Slowly there came to his brain the import of it all. His hands clinched. His eyes flashed angrily.

"Trickery!" he cried hoarsely, "trickery!"

A door slammed. There came the sound of steps down the hall. From a distance there floated a mocking laugh. The voice was Thomas Grissom's.

PARALLEL STORIES OF FAMOUS CRIMES—THE BOWERY MURDER MYSTERY

An Innocent Man Would Certainly Have Been Hanged Had Not Chris Berry's Old Partner in Crime Come Forward and Confessed the Deed.

BY HENRY C. TERRY.

THE Bowery is still one of the show places in New York City's artificial wickedness. Visitors to the metropolis parade in fear and trembling its busy sidewalks where they imagine that every stone is stained with the blood of murder; but where they are as safe as they would be on Fifth avenue. Time was when the Bowery was not safe; when every other door was a gambling den, and every crook in the country depended upon tasting, at least once a year, of the delights the street had to offer. But the glory of the Bowery has passed. It is now a thoroughly moral street given over to business of the cheaper order. I know of no story that better illustrates actual condition on the Bowery in the old days and the fierce passions of life as it was lived there than the story of the murder of Chris Berry. It was a nine days' mystery in its day, the greatest mystery the Bowery ever produced; the "King of the Card Sharps" murdered in broad daylight at the Bowery's busiest corner and not a single clue apparently to the perpetrator of the deed.

It was not until years afterward that I had the privilege of listening to the true tale of the killing from the lips of his slayer, "Lone Jack" Sinclair, as he emerged from his cell in Sing Sing. Knowing that Detective Hickey had handled the case and had almost succeeded in hanging an innocent man for the crime I hunted him up and asked him to give me his version of the strange affair.

"I don't suppose you ever killed a man, did you?" asked Jackson Sinclair, who has been known on the Bowery for many years as "Lone Jack," because of his reticence and dislike of society.

I entered a modest disclaimer.

"Well, if you never did, then you can never understand the feeling that goes with it, especially when the man whose life is taken has been a friend to you, no matter what the circumstances may be."

"It's all well enough to kill a man in battle, where there's a crowd, a wild rush of soldiers, yells and the waving of flags and the roar of musketry and cannon, for that is a part of the business of war. But when you meet a man who has been your friend for many years and you take his life, although at the time you do so you think you are justified on the ground of self-defense, I tell you nothing can blot the scene out of your mind, no matter how callous the rough knocks of life have made you."

"Well, I killed my friend, Chris Berry, and I see Chris every day, and I hear his last words ringing in my ears."

THE CRIMINAL TELLS HOW HE PLANNED THE DEED AND Sought to Close Every Avenue of Knowledge Leading to His Guilt. The Detective Shows How Futile These Efforts Were and How the Old Adage, "Murder Will Out," Always Holds Good.

We had been there about two weeks in the end gave me more trouble than anything I ever had before or since.

"Seymour was on the scout all the time, and he pulled an old crook named Colonel Wentworth into a private game in the hotel. Colonel Wentworth was a very wealthy cotton planter and a still player. There was big money in it for us. It looked to be about the richest thing we had struck yet. He couldn't beat our game unless we let him. We let the luck run his way for awhile, and he began to occasionally sock it to him."

"He preferred a game without a limit—so did we. When he began to lose, he began to drink. We played all night, and we coaxed him along until we had about \$25,000 in money, which he had sent out and borrowed from time to time. Then he became a bit reckless—he was pretty drunk, too—and lost \$5,000 on one hand. He quit the game, and said he'd give a check for the \$5,000. He dashed off a check in a hurry, like an angry, drunk man, and gave it to me. I would give us another battle the next day."

"Then Chris made a big mistake. He raised the \$5,000 check to \$8,000 by putting in a letter and a cipher. He presented it to the bank and asked to have it certified, but the cashier refused to certify it without first seeing Colonel Wentworth. The colonel denied that he had given any such check. This started up Chris's temper, and he began suit against Colonel Wentworth in the courts of St. Louis to recover the amount of the check."

"The fox colonel did not make the defense Chris expected, but set up instead that the check was a forgery. We bluffed it out and the case came to trial. Chris went on the stand, told the story of the game, and claimed that the \$8,000 was given for money which he had loaned to Wentworth during the play. He told a pretty story, but on the cross-examination the colonel's lawyer went for him bare-handed. The lawyer had got some knowledge of our swindling trip, and asked questions concerning the most intimate relations between Chris and myself. I substantiated Chris's story, but also had to go through the same searching cross-examination. After Wentworth had told his story to the jury about giving an \$8,000 check, which he was willing to pay, they brought in a verdict against Chris."

"Chris left the courtroom in a white heat. He didn't say anything to me till we got to the hotel. Then he flew at me like a tiger and knocked me down with the butt of his revolver. He accused me of giving the information about our trip to Wentworth's lawyer. I denied it, and said it must have been done by Seymour, who had disappeared; but Chris had it in for me for some reason, and would have shot me if he had not been interrupted

Chris well, myself, and hundreds of his friends came to the station house, and also identified him. They constituted themselves special detectives to find out who had murdered the "King of the Card Sharps." A dozen or more theories were advanced by Chris's friends, to explain the butchery, as he had been in trouble many times after his return from the west, but they were theories, with no evidence to back them up.

"That which gained the most weight with me for a time was that Chris had been killed for some quarrel concerning a woman. He was one of those crimson lights that used to flash up and down the Bowery with a pocket full of gold and a string of women making the night merry with wine and song. The Bowery was full of lovers in those days, and Chris had been in a number of scraps with some of the women's lovers who, at certain stages of the game, had acted too fresh."

"One of the girls that I heard Chris had taken a fancy to was a Cuban. She had formerly been the sweetheart of a Spanish cigar maker in Allen street, and these were a few facts which I picked up which directed suspicion toward him. I did not find the girl or where Chris lived until the day of his funeral, which took place from his sister's home in Delancey street."

"The girl attended the funeral and followed Chris's body to the grave. After the burial was over, I followed her to her home and created her for information which would throw some light on the case. She didn't know anything of importance. She told me where her Spanish lover lived, and said that Chris had settled all trouble with him by giving him a little money and getting him a place to work in a gambling joint in the Bowery."

"She said that Chris left home about noon on the day he was killed, saying he probably wouldn't return until the next evening, but he gave her no hint as to where he was going or whom he was to meet. I went after the Spanish lover to satisfy myself that her story was straight. I found him working in Butch Ellis's gambling house and convinced myself beyond doubt that on the night of the murder, at the time it must have occurred, he was spinning a roulette wheel."

"This ended that feature of the case, but while working it out I got a tip from Butch Ellis that Chris had been in a game early in the evening of the day he was killed, at which had been struck, some pistol shots fired and some pretty wild threats made."

"Butch wouldn't give me the location of the joint where the trouble occurred, but I found it in about half an hour from another source and got what looked like a start in the right direction. It was in Ed Kelly's, and among the half dozen card sharps who had been in the game was Al Livingston, who was something of a high roller from Virginia. He was every inch a sport of the gentleman order, and very sensitive on the question of insults, which he was always ready to resent."

"Chris and Livingston got into a dispute over the amount of money there should be in a certain pot, and they called each other liars across the table."

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